

The Hunt Club

by

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Shorty Beatty's funeral was a simple graveside service, sparsely attended. Just Pete Smith, the born-again alcoholic who lived in the trailer next door to him; Jerry Morgan, his boss down at the garage; and nine members of the Winchester Hunt Club. My wife was the only woman there.

"For the life of me," she said, as we climbed into the car after the brief ceremony, "I will never understand what you saw in that little man." When I had no answer for her, she continued. "Of course, *I* never understood the whole idea of that hunt club, anyway. You haven't killed a deer in ten years."

She was off by a few years. It had been thirteen seasons since anyone in our club had shot a deer, yet none of us had missed a hunt in all those years. Shorty had made sure of that. But he would not make the next one. I wondered if any of us would.

It was cold that morning thirteen years ago. We parked our vehicles on an abandoned logging trail, took our shotguns in hand, and headed into the woods. As usual, Shorty lagged behind. The man was never *quite* ready for anything. If he wasn't late, he was unprepared. That day he was the last to arrive, and when he got out of his old pickup, he was in his sock feet. We left him sitting on the tailgate, struggling with his boots, as we marched off into the brush.

The predawn mist was lifting when we broke cover at the edge of a cutover cornfield, and we were soon strung out single file on the path that led to our cabin. We had not gone far when Morgan hissed a warning behind me. I turned to see him standing stock-still, pointing at something on the other side of the field. At first, I saw nothing. Then out of the mist loomed the sight that had stopped Morgan in his tracks. On the far side of the field stood the biggest deer I had ever seen. To this day, I don't know who fired the first shot—and no one has ever claimed the distinction—but it is a certainty that all of us, arrayed like a skirmish line on the edge of the forest, fired at least once. The animal sprang, startled, as if to bound away, and for a moment I thought that somehow we had all missed our target. Then his legs failed him and he fell heavily on his side.

The deer was still alive when we got to him, but he lay perfectly still as we gathered around him. Pink foam bubbled from his mouth and nostrils with each labored breath he took.

"He's lung shot," someone said.

Wisps of steam curled up from the dark, liver colored holes that spattered his silvery coat. One of the men whistled under his breath. "Will you just look at that rack!" he said, bending down to reach toward the antlers.

"Don't touch him, god damnit!" Morgan said. "Let him die in peace."

"Lighten up, Morgan," the man replied. "I ain't never seen a deer like this one before. Nevertheless, he drew his hand away, and we watched as the huge, luminous eyes clouded over, dry and lifeless.

I heard Shorty call out from behind us. “Sounds like a war going on up here,” he shouted. “What are y’all shooting at, anyhow?”

“We got ‘im!” someone called out.

“Yeah,” said another—more to himself than to Shorty. “We sure did.”

Nobody said much more as Shorty caught up and pushed into the circle of hunters. His face was taut, his eyes wide, as he stared at the bloody hulk. One of the men kicked his foot against a dirt clod, and looked back to the pathway across the field. Another had broken open his double barrel and was fiddling with the empty shells. Shorty was the only man looking at the deer. From the moment we had seen him standing like a statue in the mist until he lay dead on the frozen ground, not five minutes had passed. We had hunted him for eight years.

Shorty had been the first one to see him back then. We had been out on tree stands all day, and Shorty was the last man to get back to the cabin that night. “Boys,” he said, “I seen a ten point buck out there today.”

Our land was hunted heavy and hunted hard. Bucks rarely lived long enough to grow eight points—much less ten—so Shorty’s announcement met with hoots of derision. When the laughter died down, Len Eppling asked Shorty why he had not shot the trophy buck.

“He come up on my right,” Shorty explained. “My shotgun was laying in my lap, muzzle to the left. Besides, I was eating a apple at the time.”

“Did you give ‘im a bite?”

“Nope,” said Shorty. “I throwed it at him. Stuck that apple right up on the tip of one of his antlers.”

It was fully an hour before we were through ragging Shorty about his uncanny accuracy with the apple and his ineptitude with his shotgun.

The next season it rained the entire week we were at the club, and we were cooped up in the cabin until the last day. Nobody even got off a shot that year. But Shorty claimed that his ten-pointer of the previous year had grown. When he came out of the woods that evening, he swore there was a twelve point buck the size of a young elk roaming our forty acres of leased woodland. We spent the off-season debating what Shorty was smoking or drinking back up there in the woods.

Then on opening day the following year, Doc Bennett saw what he described as the grandest deer he had ever laid eyes on some three hundred yards distant, well out of range of buckshot. Not to be outdone, Shorty spied the animal the very next day and promptly announced that the stag was now sporting a rack of antlers with fourteen points. The next morning, two others caught a glimpse of an enormous creature moving silently through the trees, and from then on we were after the *big* one. Any ordinary deer wandering into range got little more than a glance.

For five more years we hunted that deer, and every season he grew larger and more elusive. Doc Bennett got the first shot at him, but missed and got his shirt tail cut off for his trouble. In the fullness of time, all of us had a shot or two at him. Most simply got “buck fever” and missed, and a couple forgot to release the safety as they brought their guns up and the big buck bolted out of range before they fired. On the day I got my one clear shot at him I had come to the field with an empty gun. Eventually, we all had a

piece of shirt tacked to the wall of the cabin. That is, all except Shorty. Though he saw him first—and more frequently than the rest of us—he never took a shot at the deer.

Then came that opening day morning thirteen years ago. We stood in a circle surrounding the remains of the most magnificent animal any of us had ever seen. We had finally won what we had sought, but in the winning had lost the thing itself. When my wife had asked me what I saw in that little man, I could not answer because I was choking back the tears. On that cold, gray day so long ago, Shorty had looked at each of us for a long moment, then bent down over the deer, shook his head, and absolved us all.

“That ain’t *him*,” he said.